

Moral Relativism and Moral Psychology

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Much recent work in meta-ethics and ethical theory has drawn extensively on claims about moral psychology. The goal of this paper is to provide a broad overview of some of these claims and the implications that certain philosophers are taking them to have for the plausibility of moral relativism.

First, though, we need some brief terminological stage-setting. Following the custom in the literature, we can distinguish between three different versions of moral relativism, each of which will only be given a very rough characterization here (for more detailed characterizations, see Wong, 1991, Harman, 1996, and Gowans, 2008 as well as my 2002). The first is:

Descriptive Moral Relativism: Some human beings have fundamentally different moral standards and values.

This is intended to be a purely anthropological claim about the existence and extent of diversity of opinion about central moral issues, and can be formulated in various stronger and weaker varieties. The second version of moral relativism can be stated as follows:

Normative Moral Relativism: For individuals or groups with divergent moral frameworks, when their moral differences cannot be rationally resolved they should not judge the moral behavior of each other nor act toward each other in such a way as to attempt to bring one side into conformity with the standards of the other.

This view is making a first-order normative claim to the effect that individuals should exhibit a strong degree of tolerance towards any kind of behavior which is assessed differently by

divergent moral frameworks. And clearly this is only one way of stating the view – stronger and weaker varieties are on offer here as well. Finally we come to the version of moral relativism which will be our concern in the remainder of the paper:

Meta-Ethical Moral Relativism: There are no objective moral facts or properties, but moral facts and properties do exist in such a way as to depend on certain contextual parameters related to the individuals or groups forming moral judgments.

Clearly much further work would be needed to flesh out this rough account (for helpful discussion, see Horgan and Timmons, 2006, pp. 80-83, Prinz, 2007, chapter five, and Gowans, 2008). For instance, talk of “objectivity” is notoriously hard to make precise in meta-ethics, and the most common approach is to formulate the notion in terms of the existence and nature of moral facts being mind-independent in such a way that they do not vary with changes in attitudes towards them (for a detailed characterization of objectivity, see my 2007, forthcoming). Similarly the contextual parameters get spelled out differently by different moral relativists – some opt for dependence on the moral framework of the individual making the judgment, others for dependence on the moral frameworks of both the judge and the individual being judged, still others on the moral framework of a particular group or society, and so on. We will see this diversity of formulations in the various sections of this paper, and so will spend more time below clarifying the proposed version of meta-ethical moral relativism for each of the authors in question as we go along.

As stated, meta-ethical moral relativism is a metaphysical view about the existence and nature of moral facts and properties, rather than being first and foremost a semantic view about moral language or a psychological view about moral thought (I defend this approach to formulating moral relativism at length in Miller, forthcoming). However, this should not give the

impression that there is no interesting and important work being done in contemporary moral psychology that is connected to meta-ethical moral relativism (hereafter just “moral relativism”).

Indeed, the purpose of this chapter is to focus on two main topics:

- (i) The psychology of folk moral judgments, and whether such judgments show signs of a (implicit) commitment to moral relativism.
- (ii) Recent accounts of the psychology of moral judgments, and whether they provide support for moral relativism.

The first section of the chapter will focus on recent studies of folk moral judgments, in particular the important work of Goodwin and Darley (2007). Section two turns to accounts of moral judgments offered by expressivists, and specifically the claim made by some recent philosophers that expressivism leads to moral relativism. Section three summarizes the sentimental rules theory developed by Shaun Nichols and examines his claim that this theory, if correct, offers support for relativism. Finally, section four provides a brief overview of the constructive sentimentalist account developed at length by Jesse Prinz, focusing in particular on the strong connection he makes between his view and moral relativism. In keeping with the theme of this volume, my main focus will be on presenting the views in question as clearly and accurately as possible, rather than criticizing their proposals at length and developing my own positive alternative account.

1. Psychological Studies of Folk Moral Judgments

Leaving aside the question of the philosophical plausibility of moral relativism for a moment, to the extent that there is one commonsense or folk view about the objectivity of morality, what might it be? Philosophers have been tempted to weigh in on this question for a number of years. For instance, Michael Smith writes that:

we seem to think moral questions have correct answers; that the correct answers are made correct by objective moral facts; that moral facts are wholly determined by circumstances; and that, by engaging in moral conversation and argument, we can discover what these objective moral facts determined by the circumstances are (1994, p. 6).

Similarly, Shafer-Landau writes that “the semantic norms that constrain truth in ethics do not (even implicitly) relativize such truth to the attitudes of the speaker or the mores of her community. We judge our moral views to be true, *simpliciter*” (2003, p. 31, emphasis his. See also Mackie, 1977, Brink, 1989, and Darwall, 1998).

At the same time, philosophy professors are usually all too familiar with the extent to which many of their undergraduates seem to reject objective approaches to morality in favor of some kind of relativistic view (Stich and Weinberg, 2001). So in order to better determine what the commonsense outlook really is, it would be nice to have some careful psychological experiments. Unfortunately, very little has been done in this area so far, although the future looks promising. Here I briefly summarize three areas of existing research.

First, quite a bit of attention has been paid to whether young children are (implicit) moral objectivists. The main approach to assessing this at the present time is to measure whether children distinguish violations of moral norms from violations of merely conventional norms on a number of different dimensions. And the results thus far have been robust. For instance,

children overwhelmingly treat moral norms as more serious than conventional norms, as generalizable to other countries, as independent of an authority figure such as a teacher, and as supported with different justifications from conventional norms such as welfare considerations (for reviews see Smetana, 1993 and Tisak, 1995).

Nichols (2004a) accepts this work on childhood attitudes towards morality, and in a series of experiments he examined both whether such default objectivism is still present in undergraduates, and if not, whether relativistic attitudes amongst students serve to undermine certain other important features of moral judgments. In his first experiment, he surveyed students about four scenarios involving conflicting opinions, two of which were a moral scenario and a flat earth scenario. For each scenario, participants were asked whether they thought one of the sides in the dispute was right and the other wrong, or whether there is no fact of the matter in this case. 6 of the 46 participants gave a nonobjectivist response in the flat earth case, while of the remaining 40 subjects, 17 out of 40 gave a nonobjectivist response in the moral case (10). These results suggest that by the time they reach college, a significant number of students are such that their default objectivism is defeasible, while at the same time their attitude towards morality does not depend upon a full-blown relativist view about all of reality. Similar results showed up in the remaining four studies reported by Nichols (2004a).

The second part of Nichols' project was to examine whether those undergraduates making seemingly relativistic claims about moral disputes are still committed to other core elements of moral judgments, and in particular whether they continue to distinguish between violations of moral and conventional norms. In the remaining four experiments, Nichols repeatedly found that other core features of moral judgments do still remain. In particular, nonobjectivists drew the distinction between moral versus conventional norms on the dimensions

of seriousness, permissibility, justification, and dependence on authority. For instance, here is the set of questions designed to measure each of these dimensions for one of Nichols' moral scenarios (15):

1. Was it O.K. for Frank to hit Ben?
2. On a scale of one to ten (with ten highest), how bad was it for Frank to hit Ben?
3. Why was it bad for Frank to hit Ben?
4. Now what if the teacher had said before the lesson, before Frank hit Ben, that 'At this school, anybody can hit someone if they want to.' Would it [be] O.K. for Frank to hit Ben if the teacher says he can?

Nichols' conclusion is that, apart from their stance towards whether there is a fact of the matter in the moral cases he devised, "there is little to distinguish objectivists from nonobjectivists in any of these experiments" (23).

At the time this chapter was written, the most sophisticated published study of folk meta-ethical attitudes was Goodwin and Darley (2007). In their first experiment, 50 undergraduates at Princeton University participated in a two-part study. First the experimenters had participants rate their level of agreement or disagreement with 26 statements (on a scale from 1 to 6), as well as how they would answer the following with respect to each statement (1343-4):

How would you regard the previous statement? Circle the number.

- (1) True statement.
- (2) False statement.
- (3) An opinion or attitude.

The statements were chosen so that they fell into four main categories: ethical, conventional, aesthetic/taste, and scientific.

Next, while the participant was performing an unrelated task, the experimenter chose five statements (two ethical statements and one statement from each of the other three categories) about which the participant had indicated either relatively strong agreement or disagreement. The participant was then instructed as to how to proceed next, the key part being that: “None of the statements have produced 100% agreement or disagreement. In what follows, you will be asked to indicate how you interpret disagreement with your own attitudes” (1344). For each of the five statements, the participant had to select one of the following (1344):

- (1) The other person is surely mistaken.
- (2) It is possible that neither you nor the other person is mistaken.
- (3) It could be that you are mistaken, and the other person is correct.
- (4) Other.

At the end of this questionnaire, participants were asked two more questions which focused on the justification or grounds they had for their moral beliefs.

The results from Goodwin and Darley’s first experiment were striking. While subjects generally agreed to statements about the badness of robbing a bank, the goodness of anonymous donations, and to a lesser extent the permissibility of assisted death and stem cell research, their willingness to assign truth to those statements varied dramatically: 61%, 36%, 8%, and 2% respectively (1346). This led Goodwin and Darley to conclude that “meta-ethical judgments about the truth of ethical claims appear to be highly sensitive to the content of the claims in question, and not merely to whether the claims are generally agreeable” (1346). In addition, using the differences between the kinds of statements, Goodwin and Darley found that scientific statements were treated more objectively than moral statements, which in turn were treated as

more objective than conventional statements, followed last by statements of beauty and taste (1348).

Furthermore, the two part nature of the study allowed the experimenters to construct three categories for the beliefs in question (1345):

Fully Objective: Participant regards the belief as true (or false), and regards someone who disagrees with that belief as surely mistaken.

Intermediately Objective: Either (i) the participant regards the belief as true (or false), and thinks there is no need for either party to be mistaken, or (ii) the participant regards the belief as an opinion, and regards someone who disagrees with that belief as surely mistaken.

Least Objective: Participant regards the belief as an opinion, and thinks there is no need for either party to be mistaken.

For the ethical statements, 50 out of 100 responses were fully objective, 28 out of 100 were intermediately objective, and only 11 were least objective (the remaining 11 were not categorized because the participants chose “Other”) (1348). Finally, Goodwin and Darley examined the responses given to a list of four potential grounds for subjects to check as the justification for their moral beliefs. The more grounds subjects had, the more likely they were to treat moral claims objectively. And three of the four grounds ended up being predictors of moral objectivist attitudes (1349-1350).

In their second experiment, Goodwin and Darley substituted the responses of true, false, or an opinion with the question, “According to you, can there be a correct answer as to whether this statement is true?” (1351). The results showed a similar pattern as in the first experiment,

although in this case moral statements were treated just as objectively as scientific ones, and 70% of the responses were fully objective (1352-3).

Finally, in their third experiment Goodwin and Darley used three short moral scenarios, and otherwise employed a similar methodology to the previous experiment. However this time at the end of the session participants had to rate the extent to which each of the four proffered justifications supported their moral belief, as well as the degree of their belief in the existence of a supreme being and their general political attitudes (1356). They found that grounding moral beliefs in a divine being predicted greater moral objectivism, and more so than political attitudes or merely having religious beliefs by themselves without them playing a role in justifying morality (1357).

Taken together, all of the studies mentioned in this section barely scratch the surface of the empirical work that is needed in this area. We need studies which use different adult subjects besides undergraduates, and which take place outside of the United States. We need studies which are more sensitive to the range of meta-ethical options available in the literature, such as response-dependent views, expressivist views, error theoretic views, and so forth. We need studies which are more careful in their accounts of what makes a moral statement, belief, or position “objective.” And so forth. So it is only with great hesitancy that we can draw some initial conclusions:

- (i) Young children seem to be implicit objectivists about moral claims, and so objectivism is the default position for human beings initially.
- (ii) Our default objectivism is defeasible – many human beings exhibit a nonobjectivist attitude towards at least certain moral claims by the time they reach college.

- (iii) People tend to be neither completely objectivist nor completely nonobjectivist in their thinking; rather the degree to which they are objectivists varies in part as a function of the content of the moral statement in question.
- (iv) Those who offer some grounds for their particular moral beliefs are predicted to be more objectivist in their thinking than those who do not, especially if they ground morality in a divine being.

Clearly much further work is needed in this area.

2. From Expressivism to Moral Relativism

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I turn from surveying the folk to examining the implications of three leading accounts of the psychology of moral judgments. Each of these three accounts has been linked to moral relativism in the literature in such a way that if the particular account is true, then we have good reason to become moral relativists. So while moral relativism is primarily a metaphysical thesis, let us see whether it receives any support from these views about moral psychology.

The first such view is contemporary expressivism of the sort advocated by Simon Blackburn, Terry Horgan, and Mark Timmons. Horgan and Timmons have formulated the metaphysical and psychological components of expressivism in the following way (2006a, pp. 75-6, emphasis removed):

MC: There are no moral properties or relations to which moral terms (and the concepts they express) might be used to refer and, relatedly, there are no moral facts that moral judgments might describe or report.

PC: Moral judgments express psychological states whose primary role is not representational and hence whose intentional contents are not descriptive, way-the-world-might-be contents. Rather, such states play some nonrepresentational role (typically a reason guided, action oriented role) and thus their intentional contents are not overall descriptive.

The metaphysical claim thus commits the expressivist to a robust form of moral nihilism – there are no moral facts and properties whatsoever, whether of the realist kind or of any constructed or relativist kind as well. Furthermore, at the psychological level this absence of moral facts is not

something about which we were initially mistaken – rather, folk moral judgments simply are not in the business of purporting to represent the world, and in particular do not aim to describe any objective or relative moral facts. So an error theory is avoided, since it is not as if moral judgments are rendered false by the absence of moral facts. Rather, they are not aiming to represent the world in the first place, and so are not truth-apt in any robust, correspondence sense of truth.

Such a characterization of expressivism seems straightforward enough and is fairly generic in the literature. However, it might seem to be inconsistent with additional claims made by leading expressivists. For instance, in *Ruling Passions* Blackburn repeatedly asserts that he is entitled to make moral claims such as ‘Kicking babies for fun is wrong,’ and that these claims are both true and objective (1998, pp. 311-320). Similarly, Horgan and Timmons claim that the expressivist is perfectly entitled to make “categorical, nonrelative moral judgments” such as “apartheid is wrong, period” (2006a, p. 87).

To explain away the apparent tension, expressivists often employ the strategy of distinguishing between the moral engaged and morally detached perspectives (I borrow this terminology from Horgan and Timmons 2006a, 86-91. See also their 2006b and Bloomfield 2003. Blackburn himself accepts what appears to be the same distinction in his 1988a, 173.). The morally engaged perspective is that of ordinary normative discourse in which people make categorical moral pronouncements such as the following:

- (i) Slavery is wrong.
- (ii) You ought to keep your promises.
- (iii) It is not permissible for you to spend your money on luxury items while children are starving.

From within this familiar context, expressivists can understand these statements in such a way that they are *not* qualified or hedged as being only ‘relatively’ true or ‘mere’ projections of non-representational mental states. Rather using minimalist platitudes such as:

It is a fact that p iff p .

For any object x , x has the property of being F iff x is F .

p is true iff p .

the expressivist is happy to countenance the existence of moral facts, properties, and truths (in a disquotational as opposed to a correspondence sense of truth). In addition, the expressivist can say things like:

- (i) Slavery is wrong in that country even though everyone who lives there happens to accept it.
- (ii) Concentration camps would still be wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and taken over the entire world.

since those statements are *moral* statements made from a morally engaged perspective (for further discussion, see Blackburn, 1998 and Horgan and Timmons, 2006a).

In contrast, the morally *detached* perspective is the metaphysical point of view, in which we no longer engage in ordinary moral discourse, but step back and consider metaphysical, epistemic, and semantic questions about morality. These questions are not themselves moral questions, but rather non-moral questions about, for instance, the existence and nature of moral facts. And such a detached perspective is not unique to ethics but rather arises in many other areas of philosophy. Thus scientists might talk about the spin of an atom, but philosophers of science wonder whether there really are any unobservable scientific entities in the first place. Mathematicians perform calculations using numbers, but philosophers of math ask if numbers

are merely socially constructed objects. And all of us talk about tables and chairs, but mereologists wonder whether metaphysical nihilism is true and only simples exist.

With this distinction in mind, we would expect to find expressivists making claims from a detached perspective which distinguish their view from moral objectivist positions since they take the former to have decided ontological advantages over the latter. And in fact we do find such remarks. In *Ruling Passions*, for instance, Blackburn writes that “what we describe as the ethical properties of things are *constructed* precisely in order to reflect our concerns” (1998, p. 80, emphasis mine. See also p. 50, 77, 79-80). Similarly we already saw Horgan and Timmons accept the metaphysical component of expressivism that there are no moral facts and properties.

But while it might have the resources to distinguish itself from objective views about the status of morality, expressivism may instead lend support to moral relativism. Or so at least have several philosophers argued in recent years (see Foot 1979, Bloomfield 2003, and Shafer-Landau 2003). Given limitations of space, I will focus just on Shafer-Landau’s arguments from his 2003 book, *Moral Realism: A Defence*. He begins by wondering what the picture of justification for our evaluative attitudes would look like on an expressivist picture – how would we be justified on this view in forming certain psychological attitudes rather than others towards a given action or state of affairs? Since expressivists reject moral objectivism, there does not seem to be one standard or set of standards that everyone should follow in this area. So instead, according to Shafer-Landau we seem to be left with two alternatives – “either there are no standards (and so no justification of any evaluative attitudes), or everyone gets to set the standards (in which case we have relativism)” (30). Since expressivists won’t be tempted by the first option, the view “seems forced” towards relativism (30).

However, expressivists seem to have a straightforward way of blocking this connection to relativism by making use of the morally engaged versus morally detached distinction. From the engaged moral perspective, individuals will justify the formation of various evaluative attitudes as they normally do – for instance, by offering normative reasons. Some attitudes will *cohere* better than others, others will *make sense*, still others will be *reasonable*, or *intuitively obvious*, or *what morality requires*, and so forth. Furthermore, from the engaged perspective, these proffered justifications can be stated in a way that is both categorical and true (in a disquotational sense). No relativising or hedging of such claims is needed from this perspective.

From the detached moral perspective, justificatory norms can be treated in one of two ways: either in a non-relativistic or in a relativistic manner. On the one hand, since given MC expressivists reject the metaphysical existence of any moral (and non-moral, we might add) norms, then when it comes to the detached point of view, they will refuse to countenance the existence of *any* standards of justification, whether objective *or* relative. So from this perspective both objectivism and relativism about justificatory norms are non-starters. The only sense in which the expressivist might seem to be committed to a kind of relativism about such norms is that the following statements can come out true:

- (i) According to the normative outlook of such-and-such a culture, it would be unjustified to form a positive attitude towards slavery.
- (ii) This particular group has justificatory norms which permit an attitude of endorsement towards charity.

But this sense of relativism is perfectly innocuous. First, at best such claims support a form of *descriptive* moral relativism, provided that there are other cultures which accept opposing justificatory norms. For the above claims are not normative but rather empirical, anthropological

claims about the ways various groups or cultures work. Second and relatedly, such claims are common ground for all parties in meta-ethical discussions – moral objectivists can accept them just as readily as anyone else would (for similar remarks, see Horgan and Timmons, 2006a, pp. 86-91).

To his credit, Shafer-Landau acknowledges the use made by expressivists of the morally engaged/detached distinction, and tries to motivate the connection to relativism in the following way:

There is nothing that makes moral judgements true, according to Blackburn and Timmons – no ‘external’ moral facts that moral judgments might accurately describe, nothing in virtue of which such judgements, when true, are true. Since that is so, there is no basis other than one’s own outlook for evaluating the competing moral claims made by others with different outlooks...the absence of any moral facts outside particular outlooks makes it the case that the judgements rendered within one outlook are no more true than those of a competing outlook. The views of each incompatible outlook are equally (un)true. This is relativism (32).

However, expressivists are unlikely to be moved by this argument. Let us proceed carefully.

Expressivists who want to resist the connection to relativism are likely going to claim that the first sentence of the above is false for moral statements made from the engaged perspective - a statement that slavery is wrong, for instance, is true in an unqualified (disquotational) sense for the expressivist, and furthermore is straightforwardly made true by such things as the pain, suffering, and harm that slavery brings about. So presumably Shafer-Landau intends this claim and the remaining ones in the paragraph to be claims about the implications of expressivism from the *detached* moral perspective. But then, for the reasons already given above, if we are talking in correspondence terms about truth and facthood it would follow that moral judgments

are not made true by *any* external moral facts, whether objective or relative. And indeed Shafer-Landau is right that the judgments made from within one outlook would be “no more true” than those made from within a competing outlook – but that follows simply because they would not be true *at all*. It is not as if such judgments would be true but only relative to that particular outlook, since expressivists reject the existence of moral facts *as such*. Moral judgments will all be neither true nor false, which is a far cry from meta-ethical moral relativism, at least as that view is commonly understood.

Admittedly, there might be problems for the expressivist in this area. For instance, agents who adopt the detached perspective and recognize that there are no moral facts after all of any kind, might experience a crisis of conviction in their moral views, and either be more resistant towards adopting the engaged moral perspective, or do so but in such a way as to have much less confidence in their moral judgments. But such a concern, even if viable, is better suited for another occasion. The main point for now is that it is hard to see a direct path from expressivism to moral relativism.

3. From Sentimental Rules to Moral Relativism

Perhaps a clearer path to moral relativism can be discerned if we start from the account of moral judgments offered by Shaun Nichols' sentimental rules view. And indeed while relativism is a consequence that most expressivists would be loath to accept, Nichols instead welcomes it as an alleged byproduct of his psychological view.

Let us begin with the basics of Nichols' account of moral judgment in his 2004 book *Sentimental Rules*. He is not out to provide a conceptual account of moral judgments, but rather an empirically informed account of what we are doing when we make what he calls "core moral judgments." Such judgments are concerned with the moral permissibility of actions, and in particular whether such actions have violated harm-based norms. Judging the wrongness of an action of hitting an innocent person purely for amusement would be a paradigm example of such a core moral judgment (2004b, p. 5). As moral judgments, they are also empirically distinguishable from judgments of conventional violations such as breaking school rules in the ways we saw in section one above, using such markers as generalizability, seriousness, authority independence, welfare justification, and so forth (5-6). At the same time, core moral judgments do not exhaust all moral judgments, since some parts of morality are only loosely connected to harm (7).

There are two central components to Nichols' account of core moral judgments (in what follows "core" will be dropped for the sake of simplicity). The first is a person's normative theory, which is his or her body of information about what actions are wrong. And the second is an affective mechanism that is responsive to harms, where these are understood mainly as pain and suffering. The first component is used to explain why some events can be distressful and

involve pain and suffering but are not considered wrong, such as natural disasters and accidents (15). The need for a second component is motivated by Nichols in various ways using cases involving psychopaths, autistic children, and disgust. For instance, psychopaths have a difficult time with the moral/conventional task – they do not make a distinction for moral norms on the basis of permissibility, seriousness, and authority independence, and give conventional rather than welfare-based justifications for both kinds of wrongdoing. This failure to form core moral judgments is linked by Nichols to another failure of psychopaths, namely their significantly lower physiological responses to distress cues (12-13). So the idea is that psychopaths often understand both harm and conventional norms but have neither backed by an affective system, whereas normal subjects have an affective system linked to their harm norms. Together, then, for Nichols these two components of a normative theory and affective system give us an account of actual moral judgments as involving “Sentimental Rules,” or “rules prohibiting actions that are independently likely to elicit strong negative affect. The set of rules or normative theory prohibits actions of a certain type, and actions of that type generate strong affective response” (18).

Even if we accept that there are these two components to moral judgments, what we need is a detailed account of how they work together and what precise relation they bear to core moral judgments. And here Nichols is short on details, remarking at one place that they “somehow conspire to produce the distinctive responses tapped by the moral/conventional task” (29). Nichols goes on to say a little more in the next chapter about their relationship, but not nearly enough in my view to make it very clear how this “conspiring” is supposed to happen. Similarly, he seems to reject the claim that both components operating together occurrently are necessary for core moral judgments (28-9). Instead it may be enough if the affective system is present at some

crucial earlier developmental stage (29). But even so, we are never given an argument for why such an affective system is *necessary at any point* for the production of core moral judgments, where the necessity here is presumably nomological rather than conceptual necessity since Nichols is not giving a conceptual account of moral judgments. Instead at best what his arguments for the role of an affective system would seem to show is just that such a system is extremely common or frequently present in subjects making core moral judgments. Furthermore, even if both components are indeed necessary in some way, Nichols says nothing to convince us that together they are jointly *sufficient*. And so without any clear reasons to accept either the necessity or the sufficiency of his view, it is not clear to what extent we have an actual empirical *account* of our capacity to form core moral judgments on the table yet. Finally, even if Nichols provides such an account, it is initially unclear how it would extend beyond just those judgments concerning violations of harm-based norms (for similar concerns as the above, see Sinclair 2005).

For the remainder of this section, however, let us leave aside these worries and examine what bearing, if any, Nichols' account would have for meta-ethical discussions about the objectivity of morality. And Nichols himself is clear that he takes it to provide evidential support for a relativist position. Indeed, the conclusion of his central argument is that “[n]o action is wrong simpliciter. At best, an action is only wrong relative to a population – the population of individuals that share a certain emotional repertoire” (185). Here is the argument itself (185, emphasis his):

- (1) Rational creatures who lack certain emotions would not make the moral judgments that we do.

(2) There is no principled basis for maintaining that these certain emotions (on which our moral judgments depend) are the *right* emotions. That is, there is no externally privileged basis for maintaining that all rational creatures *should* have the emotions.

(3) [Therefore, morality is not objective.]

The opponent here is the philosopher who claims that the moral status of an action is determined “as it is in itself” and so holds that moral judgments are true in a nonrelativistic manner (184). And while this might be the folk understanding of morality, Nichols takes the above argument to show that the “commonsense commitment to objectivity is unwarranted. Given the emotional basis of moral judgment, we are not justified in our belief that morality is objective” (185).

It is hard to know what to make of this argument, since for one thing it is clearly not logically valid as stated, nor is it obvious what the best way would be to supplement it with additional premises. But let us instead focus on the premises that we do have. Nichols’ main argument for the first premise is that “Martians who lacked analogues of human sentiment and affection would not make the moral judgments that we do” (185). Indeed, the Martians might be aware of all the same relevant facts, but judge that torturing puppies is not morally wrong (185). Given the sentimental rules account, affect systems play a crucial role in shaping both the initial moral judgments that we make and the ones that as a culture we preserve over time. Without those affect systems, the resulting judgments would look very different.

There seem to be several problems with this supporting argument for premise (1). First of all, it relies on the necessity of affective systems for the capacity to form core moral judgments, but as we noted earlier, Nichols has not provided an actual argument for their necessity as opposed to their mere commonality. But without such an argument, his first premise should not be stated definitively in terms of what such rational creatures without affective systems would or

“would not” judge. Secondly, even if affective systems are necessary, recall that Nichols is only providing an *empirical* account of the capacity for core moral judgments, and presumably one that applies just to *human* moral judgment capacities, rather than to moral judgment capacities as such. So while it might be true that non-human rational creatures who lack certain emotions may not make moral judgments *in the way that we do*, it is a much further step, and one that seems hard to defend given only what has been said so far, to claim that such creatures would not arrive at moral judgments with the same content as ours *in some other way*. Finally, whether Martians would or would not make such a judgment about torturing puppies is presumably an empirical matter. And this is not meant to be a trivial point – premise (1) is stated strongly in terms of what certain non-human rational creatures *would not* do, but how can this be determined ahead of time? Rather, at best all that Nichols is entitled to here is the claim that such creatures *might not* or *possibly* would not make the same judgments that we do. But then it is unclear what happens to the rest of the argument once such a weaker premise is used.

Admittedly if the first premise is simply trying to capture the idea that many moral judgments tend to vary based upon underlying affective sensitivities, then it could be readily accepted. As Nichols notes, emotional deficiencies in psychopaths can explain why they do not form core moral judgments, and when it comes to non-moral disgust norms, variations in disgust-sensitivity can lead to variations in the authority contingency of norm-violations, and perhaps even to variations in the patterns of cultural evolution for etiquette norms (186-187).

So let us proceed to the second premise, which seems to be the core of Nichols’ argument. Recall that according to this premise:

(2) There is no principled basis for maintaining that these certain emotions (on which our moral judgments depend) are the *right* emotions. That is, there is no externally privileged basis for maintaining that all rational creatures *should* have the emotions.

Nichols explains this premise more fully as follows: “there is no principled basis for maintaining that all rational creatures should have emotional responses like reactive distress and concern. There is no independent reason to think that this emotional repertoire is the right one to have” (187). Instead the burden of proof is supposed to be on the objectivist to “show that all rational creatures *should* have such emotional responses... The difficulty is that it is not at all clear how to argue for such a claim” (188, emphasis his). Note, then, that Nichols does not seem to provide any actual support for premise (2), other than just taking it to be the default position and putting the burden of proof on the objectivist to justify certain emotions over others.

At this point, an objectivist about moral facts might raise the following concerns about premise (2) and more generally about Nichols’ argument:

(a) Premise (2) seems to preach to the choir. A philosopher who is already committed to some version of naturalistic or non-naturalistic moral realism presumably has good (albeit perhaps mistaken) reasons for countenancing the existence of objective moral facts, and presumably would be willing to claim that a proper subset of those facts concerns the appropriateness of forming certain emotional responses rather than others. So Nichols has offered nothing by way of an argument for why the *objectivist* should accept this premise, and rather just seems to be asserting that it is true.

(b) Related to this first point is a second one. The claim in premise (2) that “there is no principled basis for maintaining that these certain emotions are the right emotions” appears to be, not a psychological claim, but rather a metaphysical one about the

existence of objective normative standards. But recall that Nichols is offering an empirical account of the psychology of core moral judgments. And by itself, nothing follows from such a view about the metaphysics of objective moral facts – indeed by itself it is completely neutral on such metaphysical issues. For even if our affective systems completely determined the content of our subjective normative theories (which is highly unlikely), that would still have no bearing on the metaphysical existence of such facts. It might change how we think about the epistemic status of our normative theories, but it should not change how we think about the metaphysical issues themselves. Thus the motivation for premise (2) understood as an ontological claim about objective standards has to come from somewhere other than the sentimental rules account itself, and as far as I can see that motivation is not to be found in Nichols' book.

(c) Finally, it is not clear more generally why a principled basis for justifying certain emotions over others cannot be found on the basis of the agent's own normative theory. Recall that on the sentimental rules account, the capacity for core moral judgments is constituted by an agent's normative theory and affective system. And presumably our normative theories could provide us with a wealth of important reasons for why, say, emotions sensitive to distress in others are worth having whereas emotions promoting distress in other are not. One such reason, for instance, could be that relieving distress in others is important (for various reasons of its own), and beings with an emotional sensitivity to distress in others are more reliable at detecting that distress and so are better equipped to try and relieve it. And Nichols would not be entitled to respond at this point by claiming that such reasons provided by our normative theories are themselves

arbitrary and have “no principled basis,” since that would assume there are no objective reasons to begin with and so beg the very question at issue against the moral objectivist.

Nichols might reply that the above response underestimates the impact that affective systems have on normative theories. That is, he might hold that affective systems strongly influence the contents of the normative theories we hold in the first place, especially at the cultural level where they significantly impact what moral claims survive over time. Indeed, Nichols devotes an entire chapter of his book to a cultural evolutionary account of harm norms where affective systems play a central role (2004, chapter seven).

Here I could imagine the objectivist making use of one of two strategies to respond. One might be to argue that the best explanation for cultural changes in harm norms over time, and by implication the best explanation for the harm-norms the majority of us have today as part of our normative theories, does not involve appealing primarily to our affective systems, but rather to human beings having made progress in getting closer to the objective truth about morality. To his credit, Nichols anticipates this response, and argues against it at length (159-164). At this point, I leave it to the reader to see who gets the better of that exchange.

The other strategy worth briefly mentioning is to concede that human affective systems have played a significant role in shaping our normative theories, but to note that they are only one of several factors which causally *influence* those theories, rather than being the only factor which causally *determines* them. For Nichols has not offered arguments which come anywhere close to showing that the content of our normative theories is determined *solely* by our affective systems. Furthermore, we could take seriously the distinction between causal and justificatory influence, and note that while

the affective system only contributes the former in shaping an agent's normative theory, other forces might provide both kinds of influence. For instance, through a process of practical reasoning an agent might come to a new moral conclusion about, for instance, the need to send money to Africa or the inconsistency between her moral views on two issues. Such processes are familiar, and yet often contribute increased justificatory status to their conclusions. Or as another example, the influencing factor could be the social transmission of accumulated wisdom about moral topics through forms of testimony such as parental upbringing and education, some of which corresponds to the objective moral facts. And indeed there might be cases of such social transmission leading to a change in normative theory even in the face of resistance from the individual's affect system. To use one of Nichols' own examples, "[k]nowing that inoculations are for the best does not eliminate the discomfort one feels witnessing a child get inoculated" (155, see also Vranas, 2006, p. 789).

Stepping back, the upshot of this discussion of Nichols' argument is that the sentimental rules account of our capacity for core moral judgments might not force us in the direction of moral relativism after all, and indeed seems to be compatible in a number of respects with an objectivist metaphysics about moral facts and properties. Thus while Nichols initially appeared to offer us a clearer path from moral psychology to moral relativism than did the expressivist, such an appearance might be deceiving.

4. From Constructive Sentimentalism to Moral Relativism

The final approach to moral psychology that we will examine here is the constructive sentimentalist view developed by Jesse Prinz in his 2007 book *The Emotional Construction of Morals*. In contrast to the other two positions discussed earlier – expressivism and the sentimental rules account – Prinz’s view does provide us with a clear path to moral relativism. At the same time, this might not be a welcome consequence, since as we will see the form of moral relativism that results is a particularly hard one to accept.

Prinz begins by advocating what he calls “emotionism,” or the view that emotions are essential to morality. This approach comes in a metaphysical form as follows (14):

Metaphysical Emotionism: Moral properties are essentially related to emotions.

Such a view accepts the existence of moral facts and properties, and so is not a nihilist meta-ethical position. At the same time, by making morality dependent on the emotions, it falls short of the kind of mind-independence typically accepted by moral objectivists. Rather on this view morality exists but in such a way as to be constructed by the emotions (14).

To have epistemic access to moral facts, one needs corresponding moral concepts. And if those facts are constituted by emotions, then the moral concepts are likely bound up with emotions as well. Hence we get another version of emotionism (16):

Epistemic Emotionism: Moral concepts are essentially related to emotions.

But one can hold one form of emotionism without the other. For instance, classical utilitarians are metaphysical but not epistemic emotionists. On the other hand, traditional emotivists reject metaphysical but accept epistemic emotionism (17).

A strong emotionist theory accepts both metaphysical and epistemic emotionism, and perhaps the leading example of such a view is moral sentimentalism (20). This is the direction that Prinz himself chooses to go in. Schematically, sentimentalist views take the following rough form (20-21):

Metaphysical Thesis: An action has the property of being morally right (wrong) just in case it causes feelings of approbation (disapprobation) in normal observers under certain conditions.

Epistemic Thesis: The disposition to feel the emotions mentioned in the Metaphysical Thesis is a possession condition on the normal concept RIGHT (WRONG).

Such an approach countenances the existence of moral properties, and defines them as powers to cause emotions in us (89). They exist as real causal features of the world, but as relational features much as colors are often understood as secondary qualities of physical things. Situations have these powers to cause relevant emotions in us, and such moral properties can ground the truth or falsity of moral statements and can be quantified over in explanations of behavior. At the same time, moral facts are not natural scientific facts, but rather social facts like monetary values constructed by our psychological dispositions (167). Furthermore, at the psychological level moral properties are represented by the emotions they cause in us. And since moral concepts incorporate and are constituted by emotions, and emotions themselves are motivating, it follows that moral judgments containing moral concepts dispose us to act. So a form of motivational internalism linking moral judgments and motivation can be secured (89).

The above two theses only characterize the broad outlines of a sentimentalist approach in general, rather than Prinz's own constructive sentimentalism. Here is how he initially refines the metaphysical thesis for moral wrongness (90):

(W) An action has the property of being morally wrong just in case it causes feelings in the spectrum of both self-blame and other-blame emotions in normal observers under certain conditions.

Such blame emotions include shame and guilt (self-blame), and anger, contempt, and disgust (other-blame). Clearly, (W) needs further development – “normal observers” and “certain conditions” are not very illuminating clauses. In order to bypass having to give an account of either, Prinz instead invokes his technical term of “sentiments,” which are dispositions to have occurrent emotions (84). This leads to the following settled proposal (92):

(W*) An action has the property of being morally wrong (right) just in case there is an observer who has a sentiment of disapprobation (approbation) toward it.

So talk of “normal” observers has dropped out of the picture, and the “certain” conditions are just those in which an observer has the sentiment in question towards the action.

From here we can provide a corresponding refinement to the epistemic thesis. On Prinz’s view, we said that moral concepts are constituted by emotions, and so the moral concept WRONG gets characterized as follows (94):

(E) The standard concept WRONG is a detector for the property of wrongness that comprises a sentiment that disposes its possessor to experience emotions in the disapprobation range. More straightforwardly, when an agent has the belief that some action is wrong, this amounts to having “a sentiment of disapprobation toward it” (94). In other words, the agent has a long-term memory representation (the disposition) which disposes her to feel either guilt or shame if the agent is the one performing the action (self-blame), or either anger, contempt, or disgust if someone else is (other-blame). Such a sentiment is for Prinz a moral rule, and the manifestation of that sentiment in a particular case is a moral judgment (96).

At this point an example would help, and Prinz provides a nice one (96). Suppose you observe a pickpocket taking a wallet. A series of mental events may naturally result. First the person's action is interpreted as a case of stealing. Additionally, you are likely going to have a sentiment in your long-term memory towards stealing, which constitutes a rule. When the pickpocket's action is observed and classified as theft, it might cause the sentiment to be activated and a particular emotion to be formed depending on the contextual factors involved. Guilt and shame would not be appropriate since another person is performing the action – rather anger seems like a natural candidate for the emotion that would arise in many people. So you are angry at the pickpocketing, and since emotions constitute moral concepts and moral judgments, this anger in part constitutes the moral judgment that pickpocketing is wrong (96).

How does Prinz's constructive sentimentalist view differ from the expressivist and sentimental rules accounts of moral judgments that we have already seen? Contrary to expressivism, Prinz's account implies that moral judgments have representational content. While they do express how we feel, they also assert a moral fact – in the above example the moral judgment that pickpocketing is wrong is such that it “represents the fact that pickpocketing has the property of wrongness” (100). Similarly, expressivists claim that moral concepts do not refer to moral properties in the world, but constructive sentimentalism holds that they refer to secondary qualities (100).

What about Nichols' sentimental rule view? The central difference concerns the relationship between moral judgments and emotions. As we have just seen, for Prinz emotions constitute moral judgments as component parts in virtue of constituting moral concepts. On the other hand, we know that for Nichols normative judgments and affect systems are distinct and can exist independently of each other in a number of human beings (such as psychopaths). Prinz

offers several reasons for preferring his own approach over Nichols', but we do not need to dwell on them for our purposes here (99-100).

There are many other complexities to Prinz's view. For instance he devotes an entire chapter to providing a subtle non-cognitive theory of the emotions, and then uses it to better understand moral emotions. But in the remainder of this section, let us focus specifically on the connection Prinz draws between constructive sentimentalism and moral relativism. And this connection is meant to be robust – Prinz claims that moral relativism is a “straightforward consequence” of his view (173). Why? The reasoning is straightforward (174-175):

- (i) Descriptive moral relativism is true.
- (ii) If descriptive moral relativism and constructive sentimentalism are true, then meta-ethical moral relativism is true.
- (iii) Therefore, meta-ethical moral relativism is true.

If constructive sentimentalism is true, then the rightness or wrongness of an action depends on an individual's moral sentiments. And if descriptive moral relativism is true, then different people have different views on fundamental moral issues. So together the two views imply that “the existence of differences in people's sentiments entails a difference in moral facts” (175). Prinz has already supported constructive sentimentalism at length, and by drawing on anthropological data concerning such practices as Roman gladiatorial games and Inuit infanticide, he provides a sustained defense of premise (i) as well (187-195). Hence the “straightforward consequence” of meta-ethical moral relativism.

Prinz accepts a version of individual as opposed to cultural moral relativism, and holds that terms such as “wrong” and “ought” have an implicit indexical element which determines the content of an utterance contextually in part as a function of the values of the speaker making the

relevant utterance (181). Thus an utterance such as “Slavery is wrong” is on Prinz’s account shorthand for “Slavery is wrong according to the values of the appraiser or some other salient individual(s)” (200). In addition to articulating and motivating his version of meta-ethical moral relativism, Prinz also goes to great lengths to defend it from leading objections.

In what little space remains, I want to briefly raise two concerns about Prinz’s moral relativism. The first is that it seems to deliver too few moral properties in certain cases. And the second is that it also seems to deliver far too many moral properties in other cases. Each of these concerns can be reformulated to apply to a number of other relativistic accounts in the meta-ethics literature, and so together serve to express deeper worries that I have with moral relativism as such.

To motivate the first concern, consider a possible world with human beings organized in a *Brave New World* society consisting only of ruling elites together with enormous numbers of workers. The ruling elites have sentiments of approbation towards the social system they have devised and the specific abusive ways in which they treat their workers as slaves, while the workers have been genetically programmed and culturally conditioned from birth to love the elites and fully endorse their own position in life. Recall that on Prinz’s view:

(W*) An action has the property of being morally wrong just in case there is an observer who has a sentiment of disapprobation toward it.

But in this case neither the elites nor the workers have such sentiments. Hence it seems to follow that none of the abusive actions of the elites towards the workers would be wrong. Even worse, (W*) would imply that they would be *right* (and indeed, given what Prinz says about obligation (179-181), even *obligatory*), both from the perspective of the elites and from that of the workers.

But surely, many of us would say, such practices are still wrong in that world despite what people there might happen to think.

Prinz seems to suggest two different ways of treating cases like the above. The first is to rigidify our moral terms such as “wrong” so that we can still say the institution of slavery is wrong in such a world, where the use of “wrong” here is grounded in *our* current sentiments (149). Admittedly this would allow the statement that slavery is wrong in that world to come out true, but I suspect this response is not likely to satisfy many critics. For while it is an empirical question worth further study, I imagine that many people believe that slavery is wrong in such a world *independently* of whether we are in a position to judge that it is wrong or not. Rather, from the perspective of that very world (rather than from the perspective of our sentiments in this world), the statement that slavery is wrong is true (for more on the rigidifying strategy, see my forthcoming).

Elsewhere, Prinz seems to instead simply bite the bullet. When considering a world of psychopaths who regularly cheat and kill, he writes: “What are we to say about murder in this community? Is it morally wrong? I don’t think so. It’s no more immoral for a psychopath to kill, in this horrible world, than it is for a lioness to kill a wildebeest on the African savanna” (130). And one proposed explanation for this is that since psychopaths do not have moral sentiments, they do not fall under the purview of moral rules (130).

Whatever may be the case for a world of psychopaths, I doubt many of us would want to adapt this response to the slavery world. First of all, humans in that world very well could have moral sentiments such as anger, disgust, and guilt. It is not that they do not *have* moral sentiments, but rather that such sentiments have been radically *corrupted*. Secondly, by analogy

we would have to say that the hierarchical society in that world would be no more immoral than, say, the hierarchy found in an ant society. And that is certainly a tough pill to swallow.

So Prinz's account seems to deliver too few moral properties in some cases. But it also seems to deliver too many in others. For recall that on his settled proposal (W*) about the metaphysics of moral properties, an action is right or wrong depending on the sentiments of "an" observer. And consider an action such as ordering millions of people to be sent to the Gulag. One such observer was Stalin, and another was one of the innocent people sentenced to hard labor. Given (W*), such an action would seem to have the property of being both right and wrong, presumably relative to different frameworks (although this qualification is not part of (W*), which is formulated in terms of wrongness *simpliciter*). And we can also throw in goodness, badness, virtuous, vicious, blameworthy, commendable, and the whole range of moral properties – the action will instantiate all of them (excluding perhaps the deontic properties of obligatory, merely permissible, and wrong for the reasons Prinz gives on 175-180). While the observer has to be real as opposed to imaginary, and has to actually have the sentiments (understood as real mental dispositions) as opposed to merely having a passing feeling, such restrictions have no bearing on cases such as the above.

This consequence of (W*) is a specific instances of a larger concern which Prinz does raise, namely that the "problem is not that moral claims are false, but rather that too many moral claims are true" because of the "thousands of moralities throughout the world" (288). And given all of these moralities, an action such as Stalin's will be assessed in different ways with no approach seemingly available to the relativist for justifying one assessment over another besides the parochial strategy of just using his or her own relative sentiments. Nor can any robust claim to moral progress be made when, for instance, the Soviet work camps are closed (288-289).

To deal with these concerns, Prinz provides a long list of normative criteria to use in evaluating competing moral systems, such as consistency, reliance on false factual information, promotion of social stability, ease of implementation, generality, and impact on welfare (289-292). Such criteria are intended to be non-moral, and so do not help us decide whether a given moral system is any more moral or closer to the truth than any other system (292). At the same time, they allow for a kind of progress – we can make non-moral progress when we shift from one moral framework to another that comes out ahead, other things being equal, on one of these criteria.

Let me end this section by very briefly raising some concerns with this proposal (for similar concerns, see Joyce, 2009, pp. 517-8):

- (a) One might think that Prinz's proposal fails to capture what we care about with the notion of progress. It seems that when people say we have made progress in eliminating slavery or ending genocide in our country, part of what they mean is that we have made *moral* progress in such a way that we are a better nation morally as a result. But Prinz has only offered an account of non-moral progress.
- (b) More troublesome is the fact that the criteria Prinz has proposed are all normative criteria, and presumably lend themselves to a sentimentalist story as well (it would be strange to pick and choose one's sentimentalism about norms!). But then combined with a descriptive relativism about such criteria, meta-normative relativism looms here too. So *exactly* the same kinds of worries about the proliferation of normative properties, the difficulties of comparative assessment, and the coherence of normative progress would arise in this area as well. Assessing one set of relative norms with another set of equally relative norms hardly seems to advance the discussion.

(c) Finally, it is not clear that many by our lights heinous moral frameworks and practices would not come out just fine on Prinz's criteria. Genocidal practices such as Stalin's could be argued by their practitioners to be highly coherent with other values of order, equality, economic advancement, and the like, while also in their opinion being easy to implement, leading to greater social stability, applying generally to a range of cases, and so forth.

Prinz is aware of concerns such as these, but ultimately resorts to the fallback response of claiming that his main goal was just to "explain how progress is possible *at all*" (300, emphasis his). But that seems like a weak response. For surely it is easy from a moral relativist perspective to show that it is *possible* to adjudicate between competing moral systems and develop an account of progress simply by putting forward some normative standard (whether moral or not) which is true only relative to your own system of values, and then go from there.

Maybe that is all we can reasonably expect meta-ethical moral relativists to be able to offer.

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